

Knowing Our Worth

Menno Mennonite Church

January 8, 2023

Purpose: To recall the affirmation of God with us as a personal reality.

Message: As the beloved of God, we are invited to recall our reality of worth in the light of God.

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17 (I will read); Isaiah 42:1-9 (secondary Text)

Synopsis: Knowing where our rootedness is important. We need to be able to identify the values and identities that define who we are, where we come from and what we value. They are shapers of who and what we are. Yet knowing these—affirming them to be true in ourselves—and living these—living out of the consequences of the values and qualities we are offered—are two different things. Many times we are drawn into the trap of wanting to earn our value especially where faith is concerned. It is what we do, who we reach, what we accomplish that counts and what pleases God. Every so often we are drawn to be reminded that it is who we are—God’s beloved—that gives us our identity all the time. The things and accomplishments must, always, come second.

Commentary: [evernote:///view/31369896/s249/888c3c51-dd11-4a48-9e01-2c6fae18c74f/340440a9-5bbf-4374-afc7-bb09382e0768](https://www.evernote.com/view/31369896/s249/888c3c51-dd11-4a48-9e01-2c6fae18c74f/340440a9-5bbf-4374-afc7-bb09382e0768)

Commentary: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/beloved-of-god>

App Notes: [evernote:///view/31369896/s249/d299fe47-cc9e-432a-b3e7-b7317c9ecd35/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14](https://www.evernote.com/view/31369896/s249/d299fe47-cc9e-432a-b3e7-b7317c9ecd35/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14)

The Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee
to John at the Jordan,
to be baptized by him.

¹⁴ John would have prevented him,
saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus answered him,

“Let it be so now,
for it is proper for us
in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Then he consented.

¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized,
just as he came up from the water,
suddenly the heavens were opened to him
and he saw God’s Spirit
 descending like a dove and alighting on him.

¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved,^[a]

with whom I am well pleased.”

I know that we are getting well past the approved period for Christmas songs, but I was put in mind of them at least one last time this week. I was considering, really, the songs I didn't hear this season. Whether through the accidents of isolation and not getting out much, or the more insidious reality that at this point I don't really consume a lot of media that I do not fundamentally curate and control (the beauty of technology will always be its weakness), I didn't hear many of the classics this year. That and our media consumption is also being controlled by the younger set, and it is a bit of bubble that we can live in. On the upside, I think I escaped any exposure to *Little Drummer Boy* and didn't have to get that ear worm out of my head, but it also means that I missed some too. Some that while I don't often seek them out, when I do find them, the words and meaning are quite impactful.

On that short list leaps out *O Holy Night*. It is a classic; one of the ones that every semi-religious singer recording a Christmas album has to try whether it ends well on not and soars right up there with all the sentimentality that the season is known for. But it is a good one, calling us every time to the proper realization and purpose of the coming of Immanuel—awe, wonder, and the realization of the change that then brings to our lives, our world. As common and well loved as it is, it wasn't until this week that I missed it enough to go looking for it. Finding it, I was struck with the words in ways that I had not really stood out to me previously. Let me recite the first verse for you: *O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining; it is the night of the dear Savior's birth. Long laid the world in sin and error pining; till he appeared and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious dawn. Fall on your knees; O hear the angel's voices. O night, divine; O night when Christ was born...* Has it come back? Do you have your favorite version now ringing in your ears? I hope so. Yet I want us to notice some of the words.

Right away, you know that there are some phrases here that are well beyond our regular vocabulary. The world lays in sin and error pining—not quite our usual turn of phrase, and we might need to pause and think a bit of what it is, really, to pine. We might even want to look it up where we would find among the definitions: *failing gradually in health or vitality, especially from grief, regret, or longing*. What a striking way to describe the way of the world as it is, the way we all are—weighed down by the demands of Sin and error that our world fails. It sounds all too familiar, all too right. This is the state of the world as it is and what it is. We may not be given to putting it in such stark, unmodulated terms but that is where we all are: pining in the

influences of our demanding inclination to do the world. We know this to be true deeply and completely; so much so that the following line might come at a bit of surprise. The song continues in counterpoint: *Till he appeared and the Soul felt its worth*. This is what really stopped me. The soul felt its worth? I had to ask myself, and I ask you right now, when is the last time that your soul fully felt its worth, its reality, its value? If you are anything like me, I am forced to say that it has been a while. Quite a while. Yet this, we are asked to consider, is one of the primary missions of the work of Christmas and the coming of Immanuel? That is something to consider. That is something to really sing about. We will come back to this in a moment.

This familiar text this morning of Christ being baptized, convincing John the Baptist to do for him what he has done for so many is familiar. So much so that it can be easy to hear it and from its familiarity tune it out a bit. It is the beginning of Jesus being Jesus, doing the Jesus things that we know and love for him to do. But here too we do well to note what is going on here, and, importantly when it is happening.

For Matthew, this initiation is actually the very first thing that we see Jesus doing. In the first 2 chapters, it all of the birth narrative and the doings surrounding that. Then comes the flight to Egypt and the eventual return—events taken up by Joseph keeping the family from harms way. Earlier in chapter 3 we have a description of John and setting the scene, and here is the first, the very first time we see Jesus on the stage as a character in his own right doing something. He begins doing what all are doing, receiving the blessing of baptism, committing in what ever way to the way of God with us. It is here that he receives the blessing. It is here that he that he confirms on him the belovedness that had followed him from the very first. He has done nothing whatsoever to prove this out—no miracles, no rejection of the devil in the desert, no teaching that we know of, no nothing and he is affirmed in his most essential identity: you are beloved; in you I am pleased. It is here that the whole thing starts. **Being God's beloved Son fundamentally defines Jesus.** Accordingly, Jesus does not do God's work in order to earn God's love. Instead, divine love is what motivates and sustains Jesus's ministry of love to those who are hurting and those who will hurt him, culminating in his death on the cross.

It starts with love. This is true for Jesus; this is true for us as well. The foundational of Christian faith need not be a conviction of who Jesus is and what he did for us on the cross. As critically important as that is, I think it skips and important step that needs to come first. First, we need to find a way to come to even the most fleeting of realization that we are beloved of God.

John's famous salvation narrative has it right in saying that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whomever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life." As important as believing in God's son is, we must also come to believe that it is God and God's love that motivates and animates everything else. We are beloved of God, and because we are beloved of God we are invited into the ultimate testament of that love, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, our soul must find its worth in belovedness in order for the rest to have its full meaning.

The soul must find its worth in being beloved because it is the only way for the soul to know its worthiness. As tempting as it is to believe otherwise, our belovedness of God is not predicated on what we do. It doesn't depart from the world much more radically than that. Because there are always voices speaking of our worth based on how successful I am, how successful our children are, how big our pocket book is, our ability to maintain a sense of beauty, competence, what we do or do not do as spiritual disciplines, what we eat, how we respond to the world of pain and injustice, where we live, what we do—the list is one you know and goes on and on and on. Let's face it: our Soul can never feel its worth if it is something that we have to earn, or something that we like to pretend we learn. We as Anabaptists are especially prone to this failing. One of the things that I think we loose in reserving baptism for a free, individual decision (as proper as that may be) is that it distances us from the sense that our adoption into the world that God has made, and into the belovedness of God's care is something that we must choose as opposed to the pre-existing and naturally occurring reality that it is and always will be. It is not something we chose, and not something that goes away even if we decline to acknowledge it. We are beloved and that makes all the difference.

Yet this can be among the most difficult thing for us to accept, let alone to live on a day-to-day basis. It is we who know our souls all too well, and we who are given to being far better at enumerating our faults than the ways that our lives, however slowly, look like Christ. It is a symptom of our pining condition that would keep us in thrall to the messages of failure and misfortune than would let us look up to see God's blessing. We would be far happier to earn the favor of the Lord rather than to have to accept the fundamental insult that we cannot beat sin on our own—we need help; we need salvation, we need grace.

Our mistakes, failings and weaknesses are frustrating to us, become the very entry points for God's grace, love, and forgiveness, if we can allow the entry in the first place. God will

come. God will be with us. God will meet us as beloved children—as we really are—if we can allow God to meet us there instead of hiding in the garden as we often do lest even the God who made us might find us naked and afraid.

I am not saying that doing things is unimportant. Faith must be much more than a mere box we tick and idea we profess. We must be about prayer, devotion, and service. These are the means by which we grow in love and transmit love. Yet we cannot mistake this response to the one who first loved us for the welcome of love in the first place. Our souls, no matter how tarnished, are things of great worth, and a prize worth embracing. For thus sayeth the Lord.

My prayer is that as we move back into the life ordinary as we must and as we most likely have we might do it with a renewed sense of our souls own worth, a glimmer of the value that we can only begin to imagine, and the love that we are called to reflect each and every day.

We love like that, how can we not but fall on our knees?